

GRACE AND TRUTH

Years ago as I drove to work and back each day, I passed a church sign that always had a variety of heart-warming messages displayed. One day it said, "If you die outside of Christ, you will burn in hell for all eternity." Another day it said, "You will be judged for all you do, and for all you don't do." And one morning the sign read, "Salvation is a gift, but only if you live a life of obedience."

Now, it isn't that all those signs are completely inaccurate. There are definitely some things to think about there. But what I remember was that every day when I passed that sign, I felt guilty and ashamed. I always ended up saying, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, God!" And maybe that's exactly what the makers of that sign were trying to accomplish. Maybe we keep trying to scare people into the kingdom through fear and guilt. And maybe some do get pushed in that way. But I was already a Christian, and mainly what I felt was guilty and hopeless. And surely, that's not as good as it gets for us.

It seems to me that many churches TALK about grace, but what they actually PREACH is law. You know about the Law, I'm sure. It's huge and detailed and specific and IMPOSSIBLE to keep perfectly. The only one who ever truly fulfilled the Law was Jesus himself. In fact, the Law was given primarily to prove to people that we need a Savior. We can't be perfectly obedient, perfectly sinless, on our own; we'll fail repeatedly. We're forced to turn to God for forgiveness and salvation and when we do, he's ready for us. Jesus Christ has lived, taught, died for us, and risen again in glory ... a Savior given through God's own deep love and sacrifice. We're cleansed, forgiven, and free.

The law indeed was given by Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

There's another wonderful passage in Jeremiah 31: *They shall come and sing aloud on the mount of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord ... Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old men shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.* This passage is a prophecy of the coming of Jesus – our Savior, our King, who brought grace and truth. Joy is most definitely part of God's nature. In fact, God's nature is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control.

Find me harshness and condemnation in there, ok? It's just not there! Jesus took all of that – *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus* – and we're left with grace and truth. How hopeful and uplifting it would be to drive by a church sign that talked about GRACE, and not law; that invited people into joy, not scared them into guilt.

So what about the law? Don't we have to pay attention to what's right and wrong? Of course we do! Grace doesn't give us license to sin however we please, knowing we're forgiven. We still have to do our best every day, relying

on God and his help and mercy. The difference is that we're not doing good things out of fear, or because we're trying to earn God's favor. We already HAVE God's favor! When we're obedient, it's because we're thankful, overjoyed to know we're loved and forgiven already. This is a completely different mindset!

One of my favorite grace illustrations is the story of the man who did something that hurt his wife very, very deeply. (There are a lot of sins to choose from – pick any of them! They all work.) He was sorrowful and ashamed, and wanted to make things right. So he brought her flowers, and cleaned out the garage, and did everything he could think of to win her favor. He tried very hard to earn her forgiveness. But what if ... when he confessed to his wife, she was able to forgive him, free and clear? What if she offered him grace? Well, I expect he'd bring her flowers, clean the garage, and do everything for her he could possibly think of. Because he was trying to earn her forgiveness, her favor? No! Because he already HAD it, and out of his gratitude and joy, he served and loved and gave from a thankful heart.

Surely that story of grace applies to our lives as disciples of Jesus. Trying to obey the law, clean up our act, be perfect in order to win God's continuing favor – that was NEVER the idea. The Law has already shown us that that doesn't work. Rejoicing in the fact that we're already forgiven, that we'll receive God's grace and help to be transformed from the inside out every day for the rest of our lives – that's what Jesus has done! Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Our job? Say thank you, and live and serve in God's freedom, forgiveness, and joy.